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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews materials which discuss political correctness and its manifestations on college campuses. First presenting opposing definitions of the term (liberal and conservative), the digest then reports on the topic as seen in the research, and offers several suggestions about incorporating the conflicts themselves into the curriculum. The digest concludes by considering whether or not political correctness is really an important issue on college campuses. Contains 21 references. (NKA)

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Politically Correct on Campus

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According to Gary Kamiya, writing recently (1995) in the "San Francisco Examiner," the term "politically correct" or (PC) first attracted a sizeable audience with the popularity in 1987 of the Allan Bloom surprise bestseller, "The Closing of the American Mind." By 1990 the term had become a topic of national interest. As Kamiya sees it, "PC touched a national nerve. Everybody—academics and middlebrows, conservatives and liberals—had an opinion on it. The debate over PC and multiculturalism has become an ongoing public forum on race, education, politics, art, and morality—a fact which has led some observers to suggest that the controversy itself has become part of the curriculum." This Digest will review some of the materials in the ERIC database which discuss political correctness and its manifestations on college campuses.

What does the term mean?

For liberal critics and educators such as Droge (1992), the term "politically correct" has become an all-purpose pejorative epithet conflating and condemning a number of initiatives, such as affirmative action in hiring and in college admissions, multicultural education, broadening the canon of classical texts to include women and minority groups, protests against unpopular ideas, and changing vocabularies for representing particular groups. Droge argues that the PC debate ultimately revolves around the purpose of higher education in the United States, and he asks: Is the mission of colleges and universities merely to provide educated workers for employers, or is it something else?

Thelin (1992) extends Droge's opinion by pointing out that the PC label is applied to activities that in some way question, subvert, or threaten the dominant power structure. And "the real purpose of a liberal education is not to inculcate values but to teach students how to learn," according to Kamiya (1995).

However, for conservatives, such as Lynne Cheney and Dinesh D'Souza, politically correct has a different connotation. In her report, "Telling the Truth" (1992), Cheney mentions the term politically correct only once, but she states flatly that "this report is about the effort to discover the truth," which she sees as the mission of education. D'Souza's book "Illiberal Education" (1991) posits that "An academic and cultural revolution is underway at American universities...it is changing what students learn in the classroom, and how they are taught." A conservative but measured argument against political correctness can be found in James Atlas's "Battle of the Books" (1990). Atlas, a literary critic, is not an academic, and he adopts a less polemical and confrontational tone than do the academic critics on both sides of the debate.

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What Does the Research Say?

Because educators seem to feel so strongly pro and con about political correctness, discussion about PC invites position papers rather than research. The 100 or so papers, books, and articles about political correctness gathered in by ERIC between 1992 and the present attest to Kamiya's contention that everyone has an opinion on the topic. Several articles, however, discuss widely diverse specific aspects of political correctness, such as the administration of a university writing program in the face of political correctness (Williams, 1992); politically correct characters and situations in literature for young adults (Ciupak, 1992); the possible harm of a too politically correct curriculum in early childhood education (Corbett, 1994); thoughts on a critical study of "Huckleberry Finn" in which Twain's political correctness figures (Smith, 1993); and the disarming confession of a noted author of children's books (Paterson, 1994) that her books will never be politically correct—they will always run the risk of offending someone, since her characters mirror human experience rather than support a point of view.

One study of political correctness,however, comes from Seymour Martin Lipset (1992) who, in a historical review, examines conservative and liberal attitudes on American campuses in terms of political, ethnic, racial, gender, and religious issues. Lipset divides the decades into the era of protest (1960s), the era of quiescence and the move toward conservatism (1970-84), and the era of faculty liberalism and contemporary opinion (1985-).

Books by two noted educators, Gerald Graff and David Bromwich, adopt somewhat different critical stances on political correctness. Bromwich (1992) takes a critical view of both the far right and the far left positions on higher education and argues that the purpose of genuine education should be to foster critical thinking and intellectual independence in students, not to indoctrinate them in politics. Graff (1992) argues that the best solution to higher education's conflicts over culture and political correctness is

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to teach the conflicts themselves. He suggests making intellectual conflict part of the university's object of study and thereby successfully engaging students in the world of ideas and learning. His position is that parties and disciplines have so far handled the cultural conflicts with a separatist approach which leaves students out and teaches subjects in an isolated fashion without showing their connections to each other.

Teaching the Conflicts

A few of the papers in ERIC do address how to incorporate the conflicts into the curriculum. Willard (1993) describes in detail how the faculty at a community college worked together to revise the traditional humanities curriculum to render it more inclusive and multicultural in nature, with the idea that the emerging world community will require its members to navigate cultural differences.

Burke (1993) offers suggestions for making difficult decisions concerning course content and focus. In teaching materials where a mostly male canon is still the rule, he advocates increased student participation and the examination of what criteria have been used to measure success over the years. Jarratt (1992) offers two theoretical orientations for the exercise of rhetorical power in the classroom and suggests some techniques for generating and sustaining dialogic classroom discourse.

Is There Really Such a Thing as PC?

Still other scholars question whether political correctness is actually an important issue on college campuses. Shelton (1994) feels that the situation degenerated when the national media entered the fray, painting political correctness as an organized movement that threatens free speech and as a conspiracy that threatens the very foundation of American society. He believes that more sensible evaluations of political correctness and multiculturalism on college campuses show that it does not hold a position of unchallenged authority and that there is very little, if any, organized effort to program students with politically correct ideas. Burns (1994) agrees with Shelton's viewpoint that the idea that colleges and universities are dominated by pressure for political correctness is an incorrect assumption. Asante (1992) maintains that political correctness as an issue is a hyperbole, and that the political correctness backlash is merely the logical reaction to the expansion of dialogue to American society's least visible populations.

Two scholars who offer works which contain thoughtful debates on political correctness are Debra Schultz (1993) and Steve Balch (1992).

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